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RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAMA 000184

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2017

TAGS: [PREL MARR BA BILAT OFFICIALS](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR MARCH VISITS OF BAHRAINI CROWN  
PRINCE SHAIKH SALMAN AND FOREIGN MINISTER SHAIKH KHALID

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Crown Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa and Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa will both visit Washington in early March. Shaikh Khalid will arrive first for meetings beginning on March 1 and he plans to remain in the Washington area for more than a week until the end of the Crown Prince's visit. Shaikh Salman will be in Washington March 7-10 after first going to Chicago with a trade delegation organized by the American Chamber of Commerce in Bahrain. The Crown Prince last visited Washington in March 2006, and he participated in events on the margins of the UN General Assembly opening in September 2006 in New York. Shaikh Khalid also attended the opening of the UNGA in 2006 and is a participant in GCC 2 meetings.

¶2. (C) Shaikh Salman and Shaikh Khalid will both be looking to strengthen the bilateral relationship during a period of escalating regional tensions. Bahrain has clearly and publicly aligned itself with the United States in the international community's face-off with Iran, and the Bahrainis will want confirmation that we recognize the steps it has taken and reassurance that we will support Bahrain and consult closely as the situation develops further. Bahrain generally supports our Iraq policy and recently hosted Abdul Aziz Al Hakim in Manama while he was on a regional tour and we understand former Prime Minister Al Allawi hopes to visit in mid-March. The Bahrainis have engaged cautiously with the Iraqi government and are worried that sectarian violence could lead to heightened tensions inside Bahrain. The CP will lead the Bahraini delegation in a meeting of the Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) on March 8. The Bahraini government expects the GSD process to lead to a further strengthening in mil-mil cooperation, including financial and material support.

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Objectives  
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¶3. (C) What we want from the visits:

-- Close coordination on Iran policy and development of strategies that go beyond sanctions contained in UNSCR 1737.

-- Public expression of support for the goals of U.S. policy in Iraq and a commitment for pro-active Bahraini engagement with Iraq's leadership.

-- Continued cooperation on regional maritime operations, including in Coalition Task Forces in and around the Gulf.

-- Enhanced commitment to political reform, including through

serious engagement with the newly elected lower house of parliament Council of Representatives.

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Issues of Interest to Bahrain  
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¶4. (C) Shaikh Salman and Shaikh Khalid will want to hear from us on:

-- Reaffirmation of the Navy's long-term commitment to Bahrain and U.S. interest in protecting Bahrain.

-- Recognition of Bahrain's public and private steps to align with and support the United States, including participating in the Proliferation Security Initiative, joining the Coalition Task Forces (CTF), and deploying a special forces contingent to Afghanistan.

-- Strategies to harden Bahrain's defenses and contain Iran while avoiding a military confrontation.

-- Briefing on the way ahead in Iraq, with emphasis on the Iraqi government's responsibilities and ways the GCC can engage and assist.

-- Next steps in U.S./Quartet consultations with Israel and the Palestinians and methods to address the plight of Palestinian civilians.

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Key Issues to Raise  
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¶5. (C) We suggest Washington interlocutors consider raising the following points:

-- Recognize the long history of mil-mil cooperation with Bahrain, most notably through hosting NAVCENT. Reaffirm the commitment of the U.S. Navy to Bahrain.

-- Praise Bahrain's support for OEF, OIF, and U.S. policy on Iran and Iraq, and for enhancing its strategic commitment to the United States.

-- Pledge continued close engagement with Bahrain on regional challenges through the GCC 2 and GSD initiatives, and discuss the way forward.

-- Emphasize the importance of continued political reform and participation. Propose USG support for Bahrain's democratization process, including by reactivating programming by the MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI).

-- Hail the implementation of the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement and almost 50 percent growth in bilateral trade in 2006, and welcome the Crown Prince's personal support for expanded commercial relations through his participation in the AmCham trade mission to Chicago.

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Issues Background Briefs  
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Dealing With Iran  
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¶6. (C) The Bahraini leadership is greatly concerned about the threat posed by Iran and increased tensions between Iran and the international community. Crown Prince Salman has suggested several times that the U.S. and GCC countries hold a significant military exercise in the Gulf, which would send

a strong signal to Iran. Bahrain hosted and participated in Proliferation Security Initiative exercise Leading Edge in October, and the boarding/interrogation portion took place just outside its territorial waters. NAVCENT personnel were impressed with the Bahraini Navy's professionalism and aggressiveness during the exercise. Bahrain has been an enthusiastic partner in the Gulf Security Dialogue and GCC 2 initiatives.

17. (C) Bahrain's relationship with Iran is complex. The Bahraini leadership is united in its suspicion of Iranian intentions regarding Bahrain and often sees an Iranian hand in incidents involving Bahrain's Shia community, which comprises some two-thirds of the country's citizens. They are convinced Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and assert its influence around the region. At the same time, Bahrain faces the reality that it must live with its large neighbor across the Gulf. Bahrain maintains "correct" but not warm diplomatic relations with Iran, with Bahraini leaders meeting with Iranian officials when they visit. Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid visited Tehran February 24 and met with President Ahmadi-Nejad and Foreign Minister Mottaki.

(We do not yet have a readout of his visit.) Bahraini officials repeatedly assert their strong view that the international community should engage in diplomacy to deal with Iran, and not resort to a military solution. They recognize, however, that a robust military posture can facilitate diplomacy. Bahrain supports UNSCR 1737 but may be wary of implementing additional sanctions that go beyond the language of the resolution.

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Next Steps on Iraq  
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18. (C) The GOB publicly supports U.S. operations in Iraq, but a King Hamad and Crown Prince Salman have told several recent U.S. delegations, it believes Iraqi forces should be moving to the front lines in place of coalition forces. This would force Iraqis to take responsibility for their own security and put the GOI into the position of requesting assistance from its Arab neighbors, which the Bahrainis feel it has not yet done in a meaningful way. Iraqi Shia leader Abdul Aziz Al Hakim visited Bahrain February 8 while on a regional tour and met with the King. Former Prime Minister

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Iyad Al Allawi has asked to visit Bahrain in mid-March. The GOB's greatest concern related to Iraq is that sectarian violence could spill over into Bahrain, which has a Shia-majority population ruled by a Sunni-controlled government. GOB officials will support long-term measures to reduce sectarian violence while recognizing that the near-term situation in Iraq is extremely difficult.

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Israel-Palestinians  
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19. (S) Although physically distant from the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the Bahraini government and people remain highly concerned about the lack of forward progress on peacemaking and the plight of the Palestinian people. The GOB believes that progress on Israel-Palestinian relations will improve regional receptivity for U.S. policies. During Bahrain's term as (rotating) president of the Arab League (AL) in the latter half of 2006, Bahrain took an unprecedented foray into peace process diplomacy. Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid was asked to present the AL's views on reviving Israel-Palestinian talks to the UN Security Council during the opening of the UN General Assembly in September 2006. Israeli Foreign Minister Livni attended that presentation and reportedly was pleased with Shaikh Khalid's handling of the issue. Shaikh Khalid met with Livni on the margins of the UNGA at that time and successfully established a relationship with her. After the Secretary's meeting with

the GCC 2 on October 3 in Cairo, Shaikh Khalid made the first visit by a Bahraini official to Ramallah to see Palestinian President Abbas. Shaikh Khalid briefed Livni by telephone after departing Ramallah.

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Democratic Reform  
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¶10. (SBU) Bahrain in November/December 2006 conducted its second set of parliamentary and municipal elections since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. Some 70 percent of registered voters and all registered political societies participated in the elections, with oppositionists winning 18 of 40 seats in the elected lower house Council of Representatives (COR). Thirty-two of the 40 seats are held by Islamists (Sunni and Shia) and membership is marked by a stark Sunni-Shia divide. One woman, Lateefa Al Qaoud, ran unopposed and is Bahrain's first female elected member of parliament. An NGO election monitoring committee released its findings earlier this month and, while the report does not clearly acknowledge that the elections were free and fair, it states that the committee did not uncover tangible evidence of the government rigging election outcomes.

¶11. (C) In the run-up to the elections, in May 2006, the government forced the MEPI-funded NDI project director out of the country. Government officials complained privately that the director was too close to oppositionists. With an overwhelming majority of COR members, and almost all members of municipal councils, being new to their positions, there is a great need for the type of technical assistance and expertise offered by NDI. Conditions may be favorable for a renewed approach to the GOB for the resumption, even if limited, of NDI programming in Bahrain.

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Guantanamo Detainees  
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¶12. (C) Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid has come under pressure from parliament "to do something" about the remaining two Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo. He is likely to raise the issue in a call at the Pentagon.

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Military Relations  
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¶13. (SBU) The U.S. Navy has worked closely with Bahrain for more than 50 years. When the U.S. Fifth Fleet was re-commissioned in 1995, Bahrain took the then-controversial step of being the first Gulf state to provide host government support for regionally "home-ported" U.S. Navy forces, and Bahrain remains the only country in the region which hosts a permanent component command headquarters. NAVCENT directs naval operations in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Gulf

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of Aden in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, CJTF Horn of Africa, as well as Maritime Interception Operations to enable freedom of navigation and prevent oil smuggling, piracy and various other operations in support of the Global War on Terrorism.

¶14. (C) Bahrain's relatively stable and secure political environment allows deployed U.S. Navy ships to stop, replenish supplies, and provide crews much needed onshore rest and recreation opportunities. Bahrain is currently one of the U.S. Navy's busiest overseas ports. In direct support of OEF and OIF, Bahrain in 2003 deployed 1,500 troops, a tank battalion task force, and its frigate the RNBS Sabha to defend Kuwait. Bahrain also flew combat air patrols over Kuwait and Bahrain and continues to keep F-16s on 24-7 strip alert. A special operations unit embedded in a UAE contingent deployed to Afghanistan in 2005. Bahrain assigned

three shore-based naval officers to work in the command post for maritime task force CTF-150, which covers the Strait of Hormuz to the Sea of Aden. For CTF-152, which covers central Gulf waters, Bahrain has provided one frigate and two corvettes to participate in coalition operations. Bahrain is the only GCC country to participate in the CTFs.

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Military Assistance  
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¶15. (C) Bahrain has the smallest economy in the GCC and is quickly depleting a very limited petroleum reserve. We have had active FMF and IMET programs in Bahrain for several years but the FMF program in particular has declined precipitously in recent years, from \$90 million in 2003 to a budgeted \$15 million for FY 2007. We are working closely with the Bahrainis to upgrade their early warning and air defense radar systems, an initiative that has been promoted in the Gulf Security Dialogue. Future programs include the sale of nine Blackhawk helicopters to the Bahraini Air Force (\$200 million) and six Bell helicopters to the Ministry of Interior (approximately \$70 million). A proposal to provide two MK-V Fast Patrol Boats to the Bahraini Navy through counter-terrorism (1206) funding is awaiting signature by the Secretaries of State and Defense. Announcing final approval

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of this effort during the visit of the CP to the Pentagon would make a significant statement about the U.S.'s commitment to Bahrain and the role it plays in the War on Terror.

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